

VN columnist **Mat Thomas** brings the latest headlines to you.



Liver & Let Die

Lessons to be learned from the Chicago foie-gras-ban repeal

IN 2006, THE CHICAGO CITY COUNCIL PASSED an ordinance—against the objections of Mayor Richard Daley and the Illinois Restaurant Association—to make the Windy City the first in the US to ban the sale of foie gras. Animal advocates embraced the new law as an historic step toward more humane eating in a major American metropolis, and it enjoyed widespread public support. Yet, just two years later, the Council suddenly rescinded their decision without any debate or deliberation, again legalizing

foie gras and all the cruelty entailed in force-feeding ducks and geese to harvest their bloated, diseased livers.

In 2004, thanks to undercover video footage obtained by investigative activists, the force-feeding controversy first hit the headlines. **Protests at restaurants around the country caused many to drop the dreadful delicacy from their menus**, whether they were afraid of losing business or agreed that force-feeding constitutes cruel and unnatural torture. A law to ban foie gras throughout California by 2012 had been passed, and legislation was pending in other cities and states.

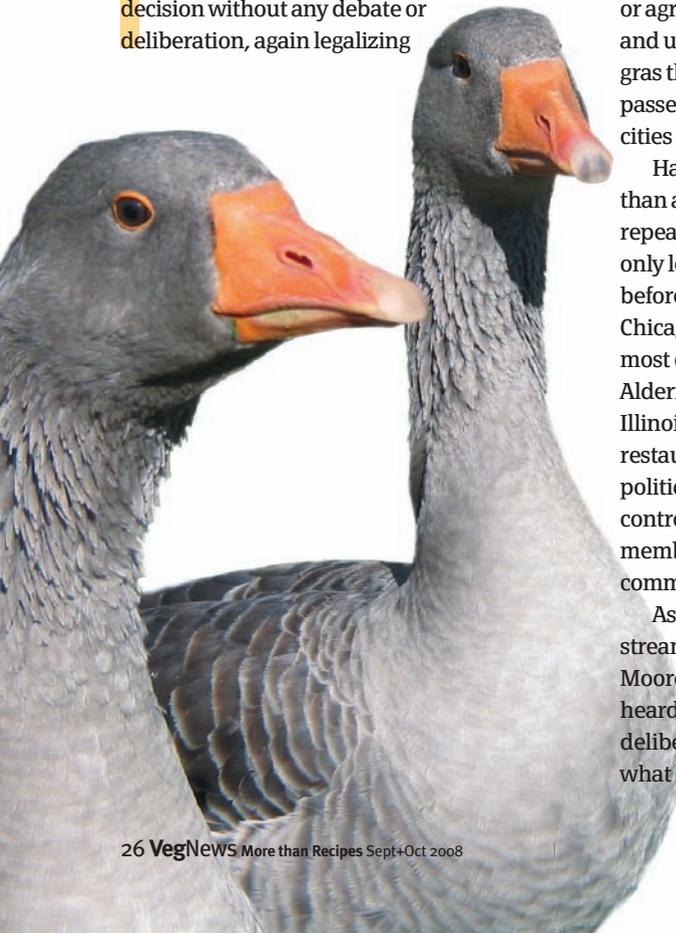
Having sat frozen in committee for more than a year, the swiftly enacted Chicago repeal came as a surprise to many. Activists only learned of the vote less than 24 hours before it took place—by the time concerned Chicagoans contacted their Aldermen, most of them were already at City Hall. Alderman Tom Tunney (former chair of the Illinois Restaurant Association and a local restaurateur) successfully employed an arcane political maneuver usually reserved for non-controversial legislation that permits a Council member to move to “discharge” a matter from committee without a public hearing.

As the vote took place on a live internet stream from the chambers, Alderman Joe Moore, the ban’s author, shouted to be heard (because his microphone had been deliberately deactivated), but was ignored by what looked to be a smirking Mayor Daley, who

ordered the clerk to proceed immediately with a roll-call vote. Of the 48 Aldermen who initially voted in favor of the ban, only six opposed the repeal. The Council’s reversal says a lot more about the well-greased gears that comprise the Daley political machine in Chicago than the issue of foie gras, but the outcome was a disappointing defeat for animal protection.

Alderman Moore first learned about the inherent cruelty of foie gras production when newspapers reported that nationally known Chicago chef Charlie Trotter had decided to no longer serve the dish in his restaurants because it was inhumane. The sale and/or production of foie gras had already been banned in more than 15 countries, and momentum against it was building throughout the US when Moore introduced a proposal to the City Council to outlaw foie-gras sales in Chicago. Yet now, in retrospect, Moore’s one regret is that he pushed for a ban too soon, before the public had a full understanding of the issue.

“We should have done more public education first, because it became too easy for the opposition to ridicule our efforts and argue that we were trying to put animal rights ahead of human rights, which obviously wasn’t the case,” he says. **“This was about getting the government to outlaw a form of animal cruelty that no civilized society should permit rather than telling people what they can’t eat.** But the Restaurant Association spin doctors persuaded the media by and large to frame the foie-gras issue as one of consumer freedom instead of animal cruelty.”



Ruffling the Feathers of the Foie Gras Industry

The ban was a tough act to swallow for some local restaurateurs, but did it have a significant economic impact on the foie-gras industry?

❖ In 2005, 79 percent of likely Illinois voters agreed that foie-gras production should be outlawed.

❖ Since the repeal, 217 restaurants in Illinois—including 84 in Chicago—have signed pledges to refrain from serving the foul fare.

❖ The Illinois State Senate unanimously passed similar legislation to ban foie-gras production (Senate Bill 413), authored by Senator Kathleen J. Wojcik, and it is awaiting passage by the Illinois House of Representatives this year.

❖ California, Turkey, the United Kingdom, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Israel, Norway, Poland, Sweden, and Switzerland have all taken some form of legislative action against foie gras.

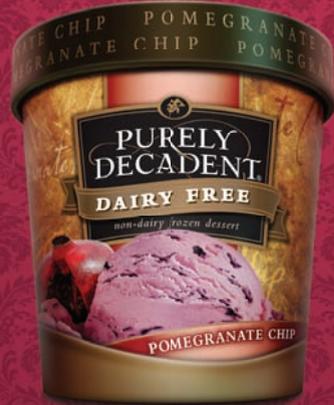
From the perspective of future history, Chicago-based activist Nathan Runkle believes Daley and his cabal of corrupt cronies and special corporate interests will be seen as out of step with the times. "In the bigger picture, this will probably be just a small bump in the road for the larger international work to prohibit force-feeding and foie gras," he says. "Now, in Chicago and around the nation, we should keep focusing our grassroots efforts on convincing restaurants that they have more to lose than to gain by condoning this sort of horrific animal abuse, while continuing to promote veganism to society at large."

In recent years, 84 restaurants in Chicago and 217 in Illinois have pledged not to serve foie gras, with hundreds more around the country making the same commitment. Until the law protects animals from this torture, at least conscientious business-owners and consumers can continue to take a stand against the cruelty of force-feeding. **VN**

Mat Thomas pens *News Beet* in every edition of *VegNews*. Write to him at mthomas@vegnews.com.



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